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★ NOV 28 1936 ★
U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, December 4, 1936

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "FIGS AND DATES." Information from the Market Basket, by the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

So Thanksgiving's over. I hope every one of my listeners had as peaceful and pleasant a day as we did at our house. After dinner we put more logs on the living-room fire, and sat around with the nuts and fruits and "good talk".

Besides the usual raisins and almonds and so on, there were some dried figs and a bowl of those delicious, tender, moist, American-raised dates. They come packed in baskets like strawberries, and they're not sticky. Someone said: "The Assyrians had dates in 3000 B.C. or earlier. In the valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris." and someone asked, "How do you know?" That started our historian off.

"Because the Assyrians described date culture on their clay tablets and wall sculptures. Even the methods of growing, much as it's done today. The people of early times had figs, too, and many other fruits."

He offered to show us the trail of both dates and figs on a map. "Let's draw two rough lines from Mesopotamia westward. One goes south, across Arabia, Egypt, and northern Africa. That represents the dates. Imagine caravans of Arabian camels traveling from Egypt to western Sahara and the Barbary States. They brought dates back from the dessert oases, and exchanged them for wheat which the desert peoples could make into bread. Later the Moors brought dates with them across to Spain. That was between the seventh and twelfth centuries.

"Now let's look at the other line, for figs. It passes through Arabia, Syria, Asia Minor, the islands of the Mediterranean, Greece, Italy, and so to Spain. After Columbus discovered America, Spanish missionaries carried the two fruits westward. They established them in New World gardens wherever the climate was hot and dry enough. Much later French settlers in Louisiana introduced European grown fig-trees along the Gulf Coast.

"Plant scientists entered the picture about 1890. Explorers from the U. S. Department of Agriculture studied the way the Asiatics and Europeans propagated figs. They saw the possibility of establishing a dried fig industry in southeastern California. About the turn of the century other government scientists got interested in dates. The date palm, you know, requires intense heat, excessively dry air, and no rainfall during its growing season.

"In fact, an old Arabian proverb says, 'The date palm, the queen of trees, must have her feet in running water and her head in the burning sky.'

"Well, as I was saying, these scientists thought the date palm would grow in the arid climate and alkaline soil of the Salton Basin of the Colorado Desert in southeastern California and the Salt River Valley of Arizona. Their experiments were successful. Of course we still import quantities of dates, mostly from Iraq. (That's Mesopotamia, you know, the original home of the date in the valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris.) But last year California sent 3,253 tons of Deglet Noor and other superior varieties of domestic dates to market, and Arizona had a good supply.

"To go back to the figs and early history: Homer mentions figs three times in the Odyssey. Romulus and Remus were supposed to have been nursed by the historic wolf under a fig tree. Aristotle was one of the early writers who understood how to grow figs. Again, the Greek word for a fig is 'sykon'. (Pronounced Secon.) It's said that wealthy Greeks prized figs so much as a luxury that they were called 'sykophants' or 'fig-eaters'. Afterwards that term was applied to spies, who informed the authorities about the unlawful exportation of figs from Attika. Mohammed is credited with saying, 'If I should wish a fruit brought to Paradise, it would certainly be the fig.' And centuries later, Henry the VIII and Elizabeth had private supplies of this delectable fruit brought from the Mediterranean.

"Here in the United States we grow two different types of figs -- the Adriatic and the Smyrna. The people in the South Atlantic and Gulf States have an Adriatic-type fig tree in almost every garden. Everyone likes fresh figs to eat and if they have no fig tree they can buy fresh figs in the local markets. A good many people in these regions can their own figs, or take them to small nearby canneries. But in a humid climate this type of fig doesn't dry well.

"The dried figs come from southeastern California. Both kinds are dried. The scientist again gets part of the credit for the 24,000 tons of dried figs that were marketed last year. Investigators learned that the Smyrna fig will not bear fruit unless the blossoms receive pollen from a caprifig tree. A caprifig is a kind of poor relation of the edible fig tree. You can't eat caprifigs, but they are important because a small wasp grows inside them. When it is mature it flies out and carries pollen to the fruiting Smyrna fig trees."

As generally happens, someone asked about the food value of dates and figs. I told what the Bureau of Home Economics says on that subject. Namely, that both fruits furnish iron and calcium, and are high in calories. Dates contain some vitamin A and are a fair source of vitamin B. Figs have vitamins B and G in small amounts.

Vitamins or no vitamins, we all agreed that we'd eat dates and figs any time, just for the flavor, like Mohammed or the Ancient Assyrians. We all voted for them chopped up and cooked in cakes, cookies, muffins, or puddings. Except that most of us thought the choice American grown dates and figs are so good they should be eaten just as they are, or possibly stuffed with nuts as a confection. Or stuffed with cream cheese, in salad. And there's certainly no more wholesome sweet for the school lunch boxes.

